

## *A dozen hot picks for Hot Docs fest*

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### **Body**

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The pandemic has all made us take stock of who we are as individuals and where we fit in a world increasingly rocked by change.

This existential concern is on the minds of many filmmakers, from Canada and 65 other countries, who will take part in Toronto's annual Hot Docs festival of documentary cinema, running online Thursday to May 9 (full program and details are at [hotdocs.ca](http://hotdocs.ca)).

As the opening night film "A.r.tificial I.mmortality" shows, even the very notion of whether humanity is limited to humans is up for debate. Will sentient robots eventually demand their own version of "I" and "we"?

Here are my picks for a dozen good bets at Hot Docs 2021, in alphabetical order.

#### A.r.tificial I.mmortality

Toronto filmmaker Ann Shin's fest-opening doc challenges viewers to engage with a fast-approaching reality: machines that don't just mimic humans but actually become repositories of their ideas and spiritual essence, a form of immortality. Shin interviews robot makers and AI deep thinkers, encountering an uncanny simulacrum of wellness guru Deepak Chopra that is real enough to guide meditations.

As she watches her beloved father drift away through dementia, she contemplates making her own virtual clone, wondering all the while if preserving memories means forsaking humanity.

#### Generation Utoya

Mass shootings have tragically become so common that the aftermath of them is often forgotten, in a blur of tears and empty promises to stop the carnage. Filmmakers Aslaug Holm and Sigve Endresen begin where others leave off: 10 years after a far-right extremist killed 77 people in separate attacks against Norway's Workers' Youth League, they visit four female survivors. They find a long process of healing but also a determination to effect real social change, through politics, climate activism and a refusal to allow evil to have the final say.

#### Hell or Clean Water

Newfoundland commercial diver Shawn Bath used to be the opposite of a green-minded person. He'd ravage the ocean for catches, toss trash out of his car window and not give much of a damn about anything. Then he realized how much garbage other people had dumped into the harbours he was plundering. Conscience tweaked, he becomes an unlikely seaside saviour, forming an alliance with anti-seal-hunt activists who still have many enemies on the island. Filmmaker Cody Westman presents a bracing look at how the quest for clean water makes for strange bedfellows.

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## I'm Wanita

Matthew Walker's shambolic road chronicle of country singer Wanita, known as "Australia's Queen of Honky Tonk," unfolds at first like a one-woman take on "This Is Spinal Tap." Flame-haired Wanita, still battling for recognition after 25 years in the game, is determined to make an album in Nashville that will give her the stardom she craves. She has the pipes - Loretta Lynn is her vocal inspiration - but also a booze problem and a yen for self-sabotage. Yet her essential dignity rises to the fore; ultimately Sinatra's "My Way" seems the better comparison.

## In the Same Breath

Chinese-American filmmaker Nanfu Wang views COVID-19 from a uniquely chilling perspective: delay and denial in both her homeland China and her adopted country, America. She shows how both superpowers fumbled and fabricated their responses to the pandemic and then attempted to deceive people into believing that it somehow validated their governing ideology, be it communism or capitalism. Wang employs the same journalistic clarity she brought to her acclaimed "One Child Nation."

## Misha and the Wolves

A Holocaust survivor's emotional tale of sheltering with a family of wolves as a lone child during the Second World War unravels after global acclaim, but that's not a spoiler. The fascinating thing about Sam Hobkinson's documentary thriller is that advance knowledge of Misha Defonseca's deception, which spawned an acclaimed memoir and film, is just part of a tale with many twists, especially after her infuriated publisher turned detective.

## Nothing But the Sun

A poignant portrait of paradise lost. Arami Ullon's compassionate doc follows a Paraguayan man named Mateo who, using little more than a battered cassette tape recorder, seeks to document the history, language and music of the Ayoreo, the Indigenous people with whom he shares blood ties. Once they were proud and self-sufficient forest inhabitants, but ruthless colonization and deforestation has all but destroyed their land and autonomy and now threatens to erase their identity.

## Playing With Sharks

Sally Aitken's toothsome doc begins as a salute to Aussie shark star Valerie Taylor, 85, who along with her late husband, Ron, helped make "Jaws" a terrifying beach clearer. The two later regretted demonizing a marine inhabitant that is now globally endangered by climate change and a black market trade in shark fins. Eye-popping cinematography includes a scene of the fearless Sally in a chain-mail suit, proving her point that a shark's jaws bite but don't crush. The film sounds an urgent call for conservation and states a truth: humans are the real apex predators.

## Someone Like Me

No good deed goes unquestioned in this insider's look at the complexities of global compassion, directed by NFB filmmakers Sean Horlor and Steve J. Adams. A "Rainbow Circle" of LGBTQ activists in Vancouver decide to help a charismatic young Ugandan man, Drake by name, find asylum in Canada and freedom from the persecution he endured in his home country. Unexpected cultural and personal complications arise, but also real human connections and greater understanding of what it takes to bridge distances not just of geography but also of the mind.

## Subjects of Desire

For the creators of the Miss America Pageant, beauty had an official colour: only white women could compete, a rule that lasted decades. The Miss Black America beauty pageant was created in 1968 to counter such racism, the 50th anniversary of which Toronto's Jennifer Holness employs as a starting point to examine the particular strengths and challenges of being both Black and female in a white-dominated world. In conversations with pageant

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contestants, academics, journalists and cultural figures, Holness reveals the shallows and depths of a beauty-obsessed world.

Summer of Soul ( ... Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)

Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson's embrace of music history is as strong as his playing chops as drummer/co-frontman of the Roots hip-hop band. He spectacularly showcases his know-how, and makes his feature directing debut, with this "Black Woodstock" reclaimed treasure: the Harlem Cultural Festival of 1969, which drew 300,000 people in that Woodstock summer to see electrifying shows by such soul, blues and gospel greats as Sly and the Family Stone, Stevie Wonder, Nina Simone and B.B. King, caught on film that sat ignored for 50 years. A big Sundance '21 prize winner.

WeWork: Or the Making and Breaking of a \$47 Billion Unicorn

Like Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and saw his wings melt, WeWork co-founder/CEO Adam Neumann pushed his office-sharing concept too far and too fast, adding ambitious home, recreation and education subsidiaries. The inevitable crash and burn seems to happen in real time as former friends and business partners describe to Jed Rothstein's inquiring lens the folly of believing the man with the \$47-billion grin and endless spin about how to get rich while changing the world through a "sharing economy."

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